



THIS MONTH : CUSTODIANS OF QUALITY

We apologise for the delay in the appearance of the May newsletter: technical gremlins for the second month! Rest assured we will do our best to catch up with diary during June....

Many of you will know the answer to this question; those that don't may be surprised: outside London, which two towns or cities in England have the greatest number of buildings listed as being of architectural or historic interest? York? Oxford? Newcastle? Cambridge?

At the top of the list there is Bath, and well worth a visit it is in my opinion. And at number two it is..... Huddersfield. No, really, I'm serious.

When you have a few minutes, or happen to be passing through the town, have a proper look around. In rather too many cases the ground floors of the buildings may have been defaced by crass, insensitive shopfronts (see next page), but let your eyeballs rise to the first floor and above and the picture can change dramatically.

If you're new to this game, may I suggest taking a leisurely coffee in the dining room upstairs at Strawberry Fair, the homestyle department store on Westgate in

Huddersfield. Ask for a table with a view of the other side of the street, and let your eye scan slowly along the buildings opposite.

Knowing a little about the buildings in a town tells you a lot about the history of the place itself. The buildings of a place are, in many ways, the custodians of its history.

Much of Huddersfield was for many years controlled by a few wealthy families. They decided what would and would not be built on their land and in the case of Huddersfield they did a pretty good job. They established the architectural standards and values of the town.



Historically, if those in control had low standards and values, we ended up with, say, the Dickensian slums of Oliver Twist. Philanthropy, on the other hand, produced the likes of Saltaire, another West Yorkshire town worth a few hours of your time.

In today's climate, our architectural standards and values are more closely controlled by government, at both local and national levels. Over many years we have worked both for and with a number of local authorities throughout the country.

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The experience is usually positive because, whether or not you agree with the decisions they take, those decisions are rooted in a desire to improve the lives of the people of their area.

Which brings me to what I think is a crucial function in present day planning authorities: to distinguish between the good and the old.



Example of insensitive shopfront design

Old does not of and in itself mean good. This is particularly true of buildings. Everything gets old; simply doing so rarely bestows quality on a building. It may bestow interest, but that's one of the reasons why we have museums. Try the Tolson Memorial Museum at Wakefield Road in Huddersfield and you may see what I mean.

Now, to state the bally obvious, to get old you have to be young in the first place. Every listed building was, at some time, brand spanking new. And one of the reasons buildings tend to be of a certain age before they are eligible for listing, is that it takes time to evaluate their quality. If you'd like to know more about the process, visit www.english-heritage.org.uk.

So where does all this leave us? Well I think there are some simple lessons:

- We should be clear what our standards and values are and stick to them.
- We must not be afraid now and again to knock buildings down when something better comes along. Even listed buildings on the odd occasion. Britain is too small a place to keep useless buildings.
- We musn't be afraid to build now, and we need the courage to put up stuff that may initially be unpopular with some people. Time can make a huge difference to the way buildings are viewed.
- Take the time to have a coffee and look at some buildings.

This month's illustrations are of Huddersfield's Parish Church of St Peter. One 17 has just completed a major refurbishment project on the church involving complete reroofing, stonework repairs to the tower and renovation of the clock faces. Internally there has been work to strengthen the balconies. The building is listed grade 2 and work required careful use of specialist conservation techniques.*

